

essays

FOXFIRE: THINGS THAT GLOW IN THE NIGHT

(FROM *A FIELD GUIDE TO NORTH AMERICAN HAIKU*)

Charles Trumbull

Mysterious, magical, and terrifying things happen in the woods at night. Toadstools spring up, unfamiliar hoots and rustles issue from nocturnal creatures; fairies are abroad. Here and there, things are unaccountably glowing...

crescent moon —
foxfire glows in the hollow
of a decaying stump

Evelyn Lang, Woodnotes 13, 1992

“Foxfire” is the popular word used to describe several phenomena of things that glow eerily in the night. Properly “foxfire,” according to *Encyclopædia Britannica*, is a kind of bioluminescence shown by certain fungi that live on decaying wood — particularly, in the United States, the jack-o’-lantern (*Clitocybe illudens*) and the honey mushroom (genus *Armillaria*). Reportedly, the bluish or greenish glow of the healthy growing mushroom can be bright enough to read by. The bioluminescence is durable, too; the effect remains for hours or even days after picking. Sometimes the fungi have been used to mark paths through the forest or attached to people’s clothing to identify them in a dark forest. With no apparent relationship between glowing mushrooms and foxes, some specialists believe that the origin of the word may be the French *faux feu*, “false fire.” Foxfire is also sometimes called “fairy fire.”

Here are examples of how some top English-language haiku poets are using “foxfire”:

warm tints of fall—
 foxfire flecks of the withered copse
 in the dying light

H.F. Noyes, Modern Haiku 26:3, 1995

foxfires show along
 an old mountain road
 only revealed by them

Brent Partridge, Frogpond 21:3, 1998

lanternless walk
 through dark winter night
 foxfire glows

L. Teresa Church, Simply Haiku 6:4, 2008

Some poets relate the glow of foxfire to other nocturnal sources of light:

Summer midnight:
 the glow of fox fire
 ... the full moon.

Evelyn Tooley Hunt, Modern Haiku 3:2, 1972

heat lightning
 through low clouds
 foxfire night

Jim Kacian, Hummingbird 6:3, March 1996

slowly taken
 into the light
 foxfire

Mark E. Brager, 2012 HaikuNow! Contest (Commended)

Are the haiku above by Hunt, Kacian, and Brager actually about true foxfire? I think they are, but, confusingly, the term “foxfire” is also sometimes used in English to describe a pale bluish glow that seems to hover over bogs and marshes. This phenomenon,

unrelated to true foxfire, is thought to be a result of the spontaneous ignition of methane gas from rotting wood. Its proper name is *ignis fatuus* (“foolish fire”), or popularly “will-o’-the-wisp,” “friar’s lantern,” or “jack-o’-lantern.” Numerous other local names can be found in English and Irish folklore. Almost always these are attributed to some eerily glowing creature or apparition that lures unwary night travelers deeper and deeper into the marsh... until it is too late!

Here is how three classic American haikuists have experienced will-o’-the-wisp by whatever name:

wait, will-o’-the-wisp
 in the marshes, till I come
 with my walking stick

Raymond Roseliep, Flute Over Walden, 1976

moonless midnight
 foxfire
 on the mountain bog

Charles Dickson, A Moon in Each Eye, 1993

moonless night
 has darkened the marsh
 occultly
 will-of-the-wisp
 bluely burns

Robert Spiess, Noddy, 1997

It is in this meaning—“will-o’-the-wisp”—that the word 狐火 *kitsunebi* is used in Japanese haiku. Curiously, *kitsunebi* means literally “fox-fire.” According to Hiromi Inoue’s *kiyose* (season-word list; no longer available online) and Gabi Greve’s *World Kigo Database*, it is an all-winter *kigo*. *Kitsunebi* is not one of “The Five Hundred Essential Japanese Season Words” compiled by Kenkichi Yamamoto and translated by Kris Young Kondo and William J. Higginson (2hweb.net/haikai/renku/500ESWd) and Higginson does not mention the topic in *Haiku World* except to say that “fox” is a winter season word.

The popular conflation of “foxfire” and “will-o’-the-wisp” has resulted in some insecurity of translation from Japanese. The second installment of Leon Zolbrod’s book-length article, “Reluctant Genius: The Life and Work of Buson, a Japanese Master of Haiku and Painting” (*Modern Haiku* 23:3 [fall 1992]) presents four haiku that use *kitsunebi*, all written in 1774:

狐火やいづこ河内の麥畠
kitsunebi ya izuko Kawachi no mugibatake

The fox fires—
 Where have they gone in Kawachi
 Among the fields of wheat?

狐火や五助畠の麦の雨
kitsunebi ya Gosuke nii ta to mugi no ame

Look! Fox fires!
 In Gosuke’s new rice field,
 Right there, in the rain.

狐火の燃へつくばかり枯尾花
kitsunebi no moe tsuku bakari kare obana

Mysterious lights—
 They look as if they’re glowing
 In the tall dry grass.

狐火や髑髏に雨のたまる夜に
kitsunebi ya dokuro ni ame no tamaru yo ni

Mysterious light—
 From a skull where rain water
 has gathered at night.

Zolbrod uses “fox fires” for *kitsunebi* in two translations, but “mysterious light(s)” in the other two. Other specialists have translated these same Buson haiku. For *kitsunebi*, “foxfire” is the choice of Takafumi Saito and William R. Nelson in *1020 Haiku in Translation: The Heart of Basho, Buson and Issa* (2006), Allan Persinger in *Foxfire: the Selected Poems of Yosa Buson* (dissertation, 2013), and W.S. Merwin and Takako Lento, *Collected Haiku of Yosa Buson*; while “fox-fire” is the spelling used by Yūki Sawa and Edith Marcombe Shiffert in *Haiku Master Buson* (1992 and 2007).

Only Shoji Kumano (“Winter,” *Living in the World of Buson* website [hokuoto77.com/frame2-buson]) translates *kitsunebi* as “will-o’-the-wisp.” Here is his version of the third of the Buson haiku above:

From will-o’-the-wisp
As if to catch fire;
Ears of dried pampas grass!

trans. Shoji Kumano

Kitsunebi, as we said, is a winter *kigo*. In the four Buson examples, *kitsunebi* cannot be the principal *kigo*, since “new rice fields,” “wheat fields,” and “dry grass” suggest haiku of summer, spring, and winter, respectively. From Kumano’s page of interpretation and commentary we learn that the *kigo* of this particular haiku is rather 枯尾花 *kare obana*, “dried pampas grass.” He explains that *kitsunebi* is derived from a popular belief that a fox breathes a fire from his mouth and defines it as “a mysterious light, seen in fields or mountains on a moonless night.” He says that Buson wrote about this haiku in a letter to his disciple Tairo: “The Haiku reads like an old artistic style but I must use the style. I beg you to read it with as much attention as possible.”

Kumano’s reading is quite different from Zolbrod’s. He writes, “The Poet is so affected by the weird breath of air dried pampas grass gives out which he sees in the growing dusk, that he imagines the ears of the grass lure a will-o’-the-wisp, as if to catch fire from it.”

More recently, I received this translation of a haiku by

Kobayashi Kōji, a living Japanese poet, in which foxfire seems to be used in a metaphoric sense:

bungaku ni kuruhishi tsukihi kitsunebi kiyu

those crazy days
in literature —
foxfire dying out

Sugimoto Kazuko, another contemporary poet, links “foxfire” and the Inari fox-god statues that guard Shintō shrines, in this case most likely Fushimi-Inari Taisha outside Kyoto. She also plays on the growing light of foxfire and the diminishing light of a summer dusk:

狐火か稲荷に灰と夏灯
kitsunebi ka Inari ni honori to natsu tomoshi

Is this is a foxfire?
In the shrine of Inari
Summer light is faint.

Sugimoto Kazuko, HI Haiku International 40, 2000

And here is an interesting recent haiku in which *kitsunebi* is translated as “will-o’-the-wisp”:

復員後狐火一つ見たるのみ
fukuin go kitsunebi hitotsu mitaru nomi

Since demobilization
I’ve seen only one
will-o’-the-wisp

Tamura Chisei, in Modern Haiku Association, Japanese Haiku 2001

Just when we think we have a handle on foxfire, Gabi Greve in *World Kigo Database* informs us that in addition to *kitsunebi* (also sometimes called 鬼火 *onibi*, “devil’s fire”) other similar

phenomena occur in Japanese folklore, including *hitodama* (literally “human ball” as in a ball of energy), *hi no tama* (“ball of flame” or “fireball”), *aburagae*, *koemonbi*, *ushionibi*, and others. “All these phenomena are described as balls of flame or light, at times associated with graveyards, but occurring across Japan as a whole in a wide variety of situations and locations.” So in Japan *kitsunebi* is used for a range of natural phenomena of which “will-o’-the-wisp” is only one.

“St. Elmo’s fire” is yet another completely different sort of otherworldly glow. It is an atmospheric electrical phenomenon that causes church steeples, towers, and ship masts to glow in a storm. You may remember vivid appearances of St. Elmo’s fire in Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* or Melville’s *Moby Dick*. I have found no Japanese haiku about St. Elmo’s fire, and only one in English, and that one seems to confuse St. Elmo’s fire with will-o’-the-wisp:

A glow in the swamp.
St. Elmo’s fire? or
Spirits?

Geoffrey Wilson, Terebess Asia Online, n.d.

Foxfire, of whichever kind, is a wonderful haiku image and could certainly be more widely explored as a topic in English-language haiku.

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A Field Guide to North American Haiku is a long-term project along the lines of a haiku encyclopedia-cum-saijiki, a selection of the best English-language haiku arranged by topic and attempting to illustrate what it is about a given topic that attracts poets to write. When complete, the Field Guide project will comprise multiple thick volumes keyed to the several topics in traditional Japanese saiiki (haiku almanac) and Western counterparts, notably William J. Higginson’s *Haiku World: An International Poetry Almanac* (1996). These topics are: *Season, Sky & Elements, Landscape, Plants, Animals, Human Affairs, and Observances*. The

current compilation presents “Landscape: foxfire.” The haiku are selected from my Haiku Database and are offered as prime examples of haiku in English that illuminate our points. The Haiku Database currently contains just under 360,000 haiku. I sometimes indicate the count of haiku in the Database on the given topic in this form: N=150; J=90, meaning in this case there are 150 “foxfire” haiku in the Database, of which 90 are translations from Japanese. These numbers have no absolute significance but are useful in gauging the significance of a subject in haiku—i.e., a very rough frequency index.

Publishing these miniature topical haiku anthologies is an experiment to test the feasibility of the larger Field Guide project. Reactions and suggestions, supportive or critical, are warmly invited; please comment by e-mail to trumbullc@comcast.net.